

Farewell to George Jones

by Peter Stone Brown

This morning while finishing my first cup of coffee and checking my Facebook notifications, an email came from a good friend of mine. The title was "Possum." I knew what it was going to say and almost didn't want to open it. But I opened it and my fears were confirmed. George Jones, the greatest country singer of all time was gone. I immediately stopped whatever I was doing and posted the news and George Jones songs on youtube to Facebook. Probably 20 of them, maybe 30 of them. I could have done it all day.

George Jones was 81 and it is amazing he lived as long as he did. He was without question one of the great musician maniacs of the 21st century, right up there with Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, Keith Moon and a bunch of others. I mean this is a guy who drove a lawn mower to the liquor store when his wife (which wife depends on which account you read) his the keys to all his cars during one of his binges so he could get drunk. The stories about him are beyond legendary. Another time when he was about to go on-stage and his band was already on-stage warming up the crowd, he hopped in his tour bus and drove away to points unknown. Someone once asked one of his band members, why do you stay with him, and the musician responded, "It's George Jones."

George Jones was one of those singers who could've sung the phone book and gotten away with it. Every country singer who came after him is deeply in his debt and so are all his contemporaries. He just had that magical *thing* that makes a great singer a great singer. He had an amazing range, going way high but also way low. But it wasn't his range that made him great though it helped. It was that he sang with an incredible emotion and passion that could cut deep into your soul. On top of that he had incredible phrasing and a twang in his voice that matched the guitars that accompanied him. And while his style changed over the years and his phrasing became more sophisticated, it's doubtful he knew how he did it. He was not only the greatest country singer, but one of the great singers in my lifetime period. He could take a line like "And the arm fell off my favorite chair again," and make it seem like a Shakespearian tragedy.

I first started listening to George Jones more than 40 years ago when my brother gave me a tape of *The George Jones Story* on Starday. It was two records of all his early '50s hits, raw and real as they come. Instantly I started learning such songs as "Color of the Blues" and "Window Up Above." While this was happening, Bob Dylan's first full fledged interview in Rolling Stone, appeared. Jann Wenner asked

Dylan what he was listening to, and he said, "Small Time Laboring Man" by George Jones. Around the same time, I went to Paw Paw West Virginia, where Asleep at the Wheel (now known as a western swing band, but when they started they were a C&W band) were just starting out, and Leroy Preston sang, "The Race Is On." Back home in a record store was a bright red album, "The Race Is On," with George Jones in his amazing flattop and a Nudie suit on the cover. I looked at that album in that store for weeks before buying it. Once I did, that was it! I was totally converted. Around that time many record stores had bins of cutouts and overruns. There were a couple of stores in Philly that only sold cutouts. Well it was guaranteed you could find George Jones records in those cutout bins, the same way it was guaranteed you could walk into a bookstore in any railroad station and find a Nero Wolfe book you hadn't read, and soon my George Jones collection doubled, then tripled and many of them were two-record sets. Figuring out which records were from what years and what period was another story entirely. This was before dates were on records and Jones records were on Starday, Mercury, United Artists, RCA and Epic. And every time he'd switch labels, he'd re-record his old hits. Eventually I figured out that RCA had bought his Musicor Catalog. The stuff on Epic was contemporary and the first one I bought was his first duet album with his new wife, Tammy Wynette, *We Go together*, which remains their best album and one I play to this day.

Around this time the *George Jones-Tammy Wynette Show* played Philadelphia's Convention Hall. Naturally I went by myself. Few of my friends at the time were listening to George Jones. Convention Hall was huge and maybe there were a couple of hundred people in attendance if that. Philly never was a country music town. It was the first real country and western concert I went to, and it was a show with opening acts and a comic. Tammy Wynette who turned out to be a hell of a performer took the stage before George, and then finally he came out and then Tammy came out again for a couple of duets.

A couple of years later, a friend of a friend who played bass in a bluegrass band was opening for Jones somewhere in Southern Virginia, so we drove down with the bass player, getting up at some outrageous hour like 4 am since the show was in the afternoon. The show was in some field in the middle of nowhere. Most of the audience brought lawn chairs with them. It was incredibly hot and humid day in the middle of the summer with no shade whatsoever. I wasn't prepared for the reaction when Jones took the stage. All these middle-aged women in lawn chairs went absolute nuts, screaming like a Beatles concert. And when Jones would go real low during a song, they'd go even crazier. It was at that moment I realized that

sometimes to really appreciate a performer, you have to see them in their natural habitat, in this case, the South, simply because of the audience reaction. For instance there was a huge difference seeing Doug Sahm play in Philly and seeing him play in Texas. In Philly, he was a hero to the musicians in attendance. In Texas, he was a hero period.

A couple of years after that, George Jones came to Sunset Park, which is about 50 miles south of Philly, near the Delaware/Maryland border. Sunset Park was a country music venue that held shows outside in the summer on Sunday afternoons. Every country singer and bluegrass band played Sunset Park. Hank Williams played Sunset Park. The parking lot of Sunset Park was filled with RVs and musicians picking. Inside there was a small play area for the kids with a merry go round and a tiny Ferris wheel. There were various little stands to buy food and of course a stage with wooden benches to sit on that many people again would bring lawn chairs to put over the benches. There were a few acts before the star act, and Ola Belle Reed and her family were the house band. The main act would usually pull in while one of the openers were playing and it was always a big deal when their tour bus pulled into the lot and parked behind the stage. Sunset Park also had a very strict no liquor policy as a couple of musician friends of mine found out 20 years later at another Jones show when they found out that putting whiskey into a 7-Up can didn't work.

I had just become a disc-jockey on WXPB in Philly and quickly found out that when you're on the radio, it wasn't too hard to get interviews. So I arranged to interview George Jones. Now I was there by myself and I was the only person in the park who looked the way I did, which is to say I had long hair and even though this was the mid-'70s, everyone else had crew cuts. I was hoping to interview Jones before his first set, but that didn't happen. So he did his set which always included a medley of his hits, several other hits and whatever his latest song was. Every time I saw him, he would always say, "We're gonna play all night if you want us," and then be off stage in 50 minutes.

So Jones finishes his set, disappears onto his bus. And I'm standing there with a tape recorder in shoulder bag and I wait some more. Hours go by. Now at this time, Jones' drinking was notorious, so much so that it made the newspapers. And I'm wondering if they're sobering him up, and his road manager knows I'm there, but nothing is happening. Finally 30 minutes before he was supposed to go on-stage, I go on the bus and since this was my second or third interview I'm nervous as shit. Jones didn't seem the least bit drunk and was actually quite friendly, and made it quite apparent that what he was

into was pure country music. And as it turned out, his next album released a couple of months later *Home Again* was a return to a basic country sound, with a fiddle replacing the strings that had adorned his recent albums and basic country band.

I saw George Jones several times after that, and even though he was known as “No Show Jones,” and even had a hit song of the same name, which he eventually opened his shows with, in my case, he always showed up. He was always good, and his shows were always pretty much the same, though at one show at Valley Forge he seemed to deviate from his standard set and play a few more of his old songs than usual.

But none of this conveys the impact of his hundreds of records, a catalogue that is confusing, extensive and brilliant. Back when there were record stores, there was always and in used record stores there still is a good chance of finding a George Jones album you never saw before. About 10 years ago I put together my own person 3-disc compilation of all his records that I had up to that time. I ended up with 90 songs. But the thing is for every song I picked, there were ten more I could have picked.

What George Jones excelled in was songs of heartbreak and songs of drinking. He also did quite a few upbeat novelty songs, and even cut a few rockabilly tracks under the name, Thumper Jones. But no one on this earth could sing a sad song sadder than George Jones and no one ever will.